

MacKay takes on defence

Handed the delicate task of selling the Afghan mission to skeptical Canadians

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OTTAWA—Canada's divisive military mission in Afghanistan has a new messenger.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper yesterday ended Gordon O'Connor's troubled tenure as defence minister, replacing him with Peter MacKay, a more sure-footed communicator as the future of Canada's role in Kandahar returns to the Commons for debate in the coming months.

O'Connor was the biggest loser as Harper shuffled his 32-member cabinet, giving new responsibilities to eight of his ministers and adding Calgary MP Diane Ablonczy. With the announced retirement of Carol Skelton, it means cabinet will still have only seven women.

While he changed the face of his cabinet on sensitive files like defence and foreign affairs, Harper signalled not much else would change about his government's overall agenda or operations.

Speaking after the swearing-in ceremony, Harper made clear that the priorities for his government would remain sovereignty, the economy, crime, the environment and Canada's role in the world.

"This government is not here to make sudden ... U-turns. Agendas are not going to appear out of the sky," Harper told reporters at his official residence at 24 Sussex Drive.

"We're here to continue our efforts to realize all the work that we've started ... and add on a perspective that is long-term."

But while improved communications was ostensibly one reason behind yesterday's moves, none of the shuffled ministers was given a chance to speak.

Harper paid tribute to O'Connor's 19-month tenure atop the defence department, praising the one-time general for overseeing a period of "historic" investment for the armed forces.

At the same time, he conceded that the Afghan mission, where 66 Canadian soldiers have already been killed, faces "challenges."

Harper handed the job of pitching the mission to a divided home front to MacKay – seen as able to handle the sensitive, substantive crises that arise on the fly, unlike O'Connor – and up-and-comer Maxime Bernier of Quebec.

Bernier, a political neophyte first elected in 2006, was named foreign affairs minister and given the task of selling the mission in Quebec at a time when troops from that province are on the frontlines in Kandahar.

O'Connor was shuffled to national revenue, to replace Skelton, who has said she won't run in the next federal election.

Jim Prentice, a trusted Harper lieutenant, was rewarded for his work in Indian affairs and given the job as minister of industry. Chuck Strahl replaces Prentice at Indian affairs at a time when Canada's native community is still stinging from Harper's cancellation of the Liberal Kelowna accord.

International Co-operation Minister Josée Verner swapped jobs with Heritage Minister Bev Oda, a move that will boost Ottawa's profile during Quebec's 400th anniversary next year, and on the arts and culture file.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, the highest-ranking GTA minister, remains in his job, defying suggestions that he would be shuffled because of missteps.

But it was clear, too, that the government, having quickly carried out several election vows, such as cutting the GST and mailing child-care payments to parents, in anticipation of a snap election call, is now settling in for the long haul, perhaps until 2009.

Harper said the changes give "our ministers more varied experience (and build) the team for the longer term."

Following Harper's remarks, senior PMO officials were at pains to emphasize the message of continuity, pointing out that only one person – Skelton – has been dropped from cabinet, and that none of the ministers who were shuffled had previously been moved.

Opposition leaders immediately called on Harper to lay the groundwork for

a pullout of the 2,500 Canadian troops from Afghanistan.

NDP Leader Jack Layton called the shuffle a "cosmetic change.

"Mr. MacKay holds exactly the same views on the war in Afghanistan. There's no change in substance here, there's no change in direction," he said.

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion said the shuffle "will not restore Canadians' trust in his government."

"For the second time in less than two years, Mr. Harper has been forced to replace incompetent ministers," said Dion.

Dion, in a written release, said Canadians' trust "has been undermined in a number of key areas, including the economy, the environment and Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan."

He said Bernier and MacKay should immediately tell NATO that the Canadian combat mission in Kandahar will end on schedule in February 2009.

O'Connor paid the price for a series of missteps and fumbles in the sensitive portfolio. In one case, he was forced to apologize earlier this year for telling the Commons that the Red Cross would alert Ottawa about any abuse of prisoners held in Afghan custody.

Harper, who had resisted months of opposition calls demanding O'Connor's resignation, finally relented. He said it was time for the career soldier "to have some other experiences.

The Prime Minister was asked if the government's communication program around Afghanistan had been a failure, especially in Quebec, where people are deeply divided about the merits of the mission.

"Quebecers generally appreciate and understand the importance of our international commitments," Harper said. "They understand that it's a dangerous situation and the government wants to minimize the number of deaths.

"Thus we are working hard to focus to a greater extent on development."

And yet Harper named Oda to oversee that development work, despite her undistinguished record as heritage minister. Oda, a weak communicator who does not speak French, will be a junior player on a hot file.

Although polls suggest Harper's agenda has thus far failed to make further inroads in Ontario and major urban centres like Toronto, Environment Minister John Baird, the political minister for Ontario, insisted the continued focus on "good government" would make a difference.

"I think good government *is* good politics," said Baird, and that means "you put people in the right place at the right time."

Pollster Frank Graves said effective handling of the Afghan issue is "crucial" to Harper's hopes of a majority government.

"It's the linchpin that will determine his success in the next election," said Graves, president of EKOS Research.

With files from Sean Gordon